# MINERAL KING

## AT THE CROSSROADS

2023.009.0014

Present village in trees (foreground). Disney Enterprises development would also be in this area. Proposed chairlift would go to Farewell Gap (horizon, left). Gondola would go to Mineral Queen Peak (second peak from right).

# WILL IT BE PROTECTED AS PARKLAND?

## OR

# BECOME ANOTHER OVER-DEVELOPED YOSEMITE VALLEY?

The mountains provide variety for our lives—clean air and water, quiet, solitude, uncluttered vistas, and beauty. These things we prize, but they must be guarded, for they can disappear as quickly in the mountains as they have elsewhere. Clean air and water can be polluted, quiet and solitude can be lost to the crowds, the vistas and beauty overwhelmed by the structures of man. That is what may happen to Mineral King.

## WHAT IS MINERAL KING?

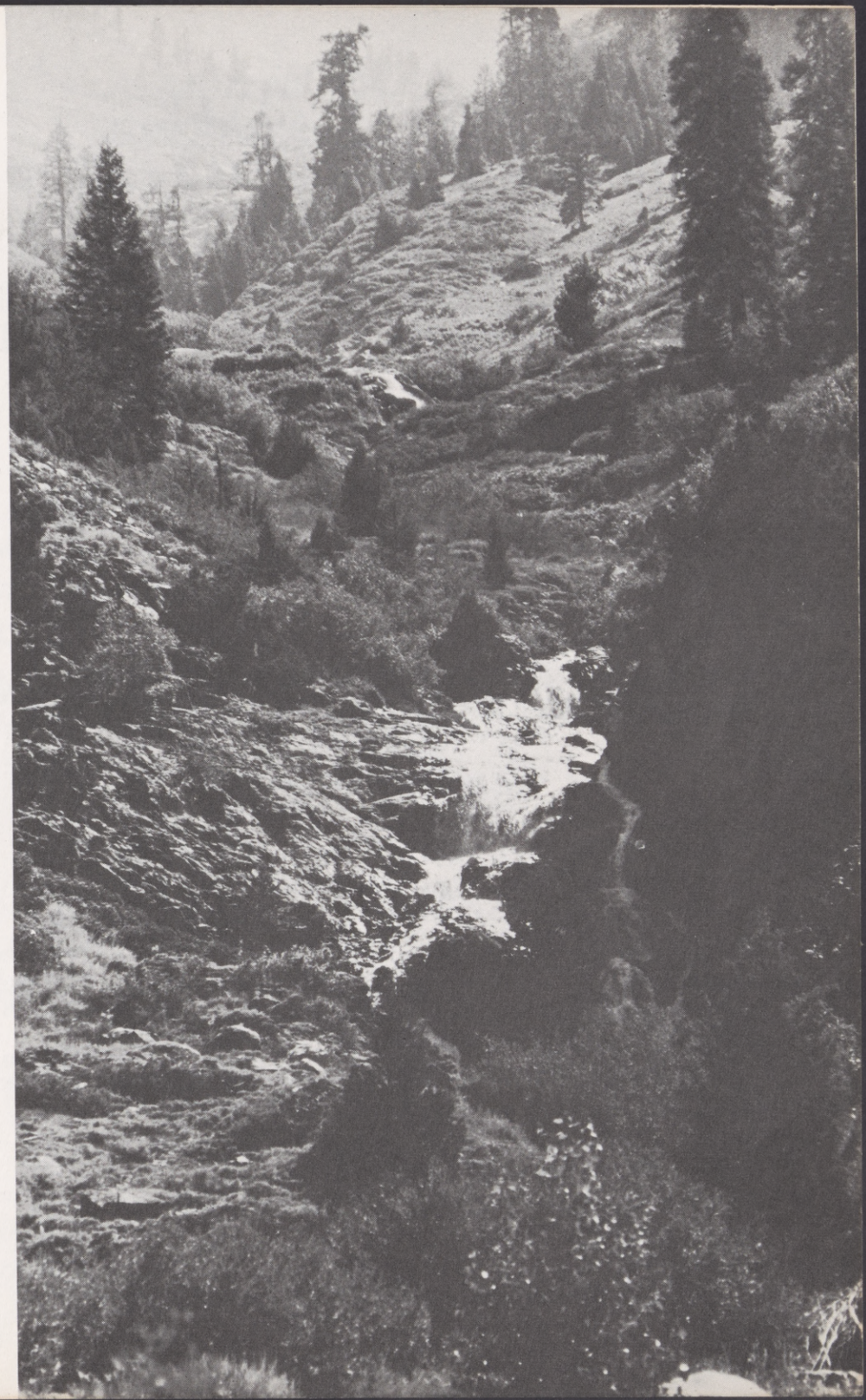
The name "Mineral King" refers to a scenic alpine valley in a 15,000-acre portion of public land surrounded on three sides by Sequoia National Park in the heart of California's Sierra Nevada, about equi-distant from Los Angeles and San Francisco. A 26-mile access road turns east from the main highway to Giant Forest, passes through a section of Sequoia National Park, and dead-ends at an elevation of 7,800 feet at a small cluster of cabins called Mineral King village. (See map)

Mineral King has special natural characteristics and recreational attributes of great value. Although its scenic and ecological features are reminiscent of many other regions of the High Sierra, Mineral King is in many ways unique. Here, a primitive road reaches to the headwaters of a major river (East Fork of the Kaweah) providing direct access to at least five alpine passes. Yet the two-mile long valley is essentially unspoiled. Mineral King's U-shaped basin is rimmed with peaks rising three to four thousand feet above the valley floor to heights of over 12,000 feet. Six streams cascade into the valley from the heights above, and join to flow through meadows and groves of aspen and cottonwood. A number of alpine lakes are within less than two hours walking distance of the roadhead from which trails radiate in all directions into the southern part of Sequoia National Park, including the magnificent Great Western Divide-Big Kern Sierra to the east, and into Little Kern territory of Sequoia National Forest to the south, over Farewell Gap.

Because of supposedly valuable mineral deposits, the Mineral King valley and its environs were left out of Sequoia National Park in the early days, even though the *area is ecologically part of the park and comprises the headwaters of the East Fork of the Kaweah River which flows through the park farther downstream.* The area is under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service, and was designated the Sequoia National Game Refuge by Act of Congress in 1926.

The "improvements" within the area consist of about 60 cabins, along or near the river, most of which are leased from the Forest Service for summer use. These cabins, a pack station, a small general store and post office, several campsites and a few *remnants of the early-days mining activity occupy less than 10% of the total area of the refuge. The remainder is wilderness where mule deer and other wildlife abound.*

In addition to its function as a wildlife refuge, Mineral King now serves as a natural recreation area for hikers, sightseers, campers, fishermen, and students of natural history. Some visitors remain near the rustic village and campsites on the valley floor, others travel on foot or on horseback into the unspoiled high country of the Refuge. *Mineral King carries no "admission charge"* and is accessible to anyone who wishes to take the leisurely and scenic drive along the narrow access road above the spectacular canyon of the East Fork of the Kaweah from the town of Three Rivers.



One of the side streams that cascades into the valley.

## WHAT ARE THE "PLANS" FOR MINERAL KING?

The U.S. Forest Service has regrettably approved the master plan of Walt Disney Productions for turning this game refuge into a $35,000,000 mass recreation resort designed to attract almost 1,000,000 visitors per year. This is roughly half the visitation that already causes a serious overcrowding in Yosemite, and Yosemite is approximately eight times the size of Mineral King! Moreover, the Disney resort will be primarily a summer resort with 60% of the total visitation expected during the summer months, when the impact of such a heavy visitation would be the greatest. At Mineral King this would mean that the tiny valley (300 acres) would be subjected to the tread of 5,000 to 10,000 people per day.

The plans call for an "alpine village" at the entrance to the valley where it would dominate the view from every direction. Included would be a five-story hotel complex of 1030 rooms designed to accommodate 3310 guests. As a standard of comparison, consider the fact that the 11-story Disneyland Hotel has only 608 rooms, and that the largest hotel in Los Angeles, the Biltmore, has 1500 rooms. Numerous restaurants (at least one atop a peak) would have the capacity to serve 2,300 guests at one time. A reservoir would replace the river and the meadow which now carpets the main part of the valley. There would also be a conference center, theater, swimming pools, apartments, specialty shops selling imported goods, a school, a golf course, tennis courts, a maintenance shop, and a depot for the cog-assisted railroad which would run between the village and the parking area a mile and a quarter away.

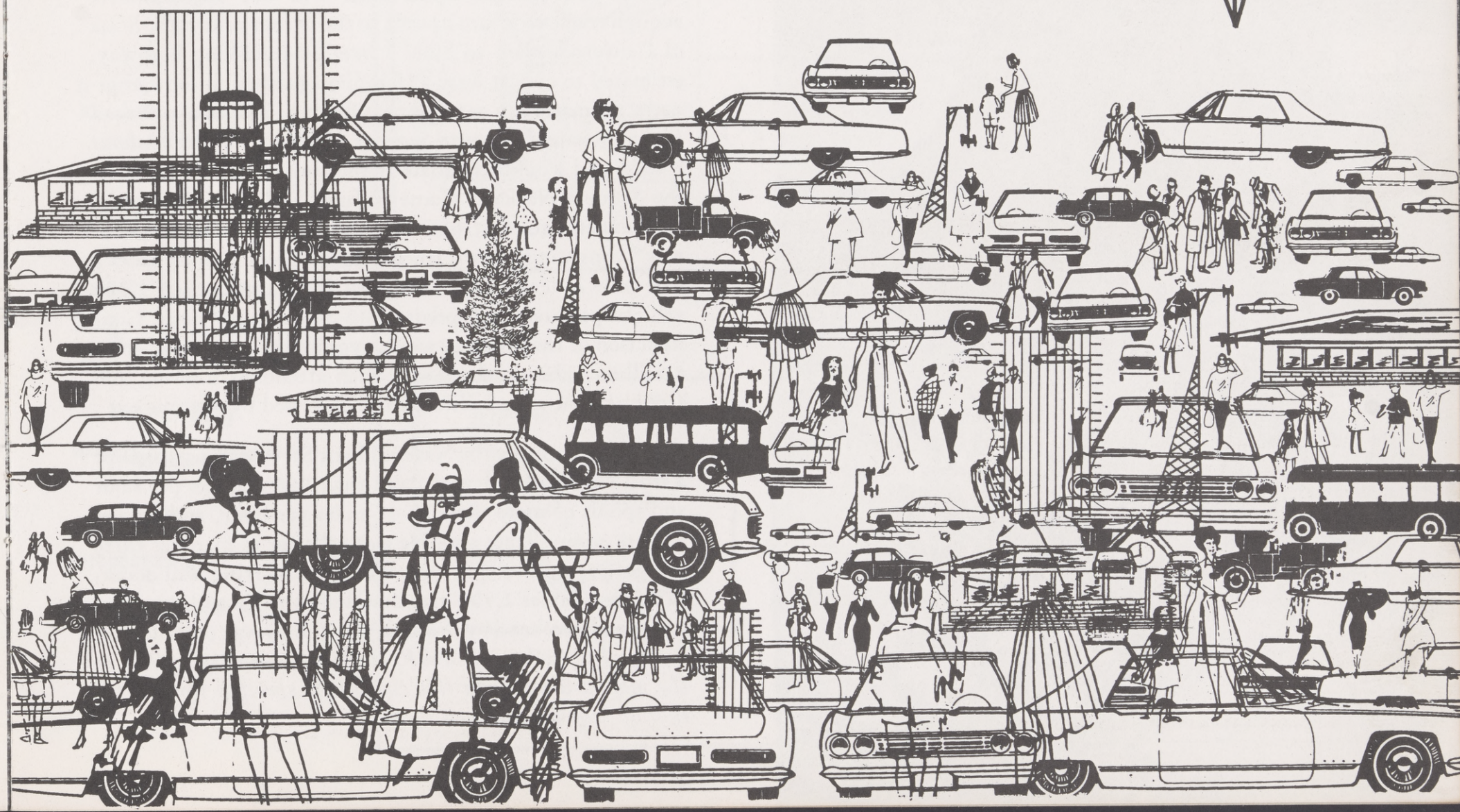
This auto reception center would include a hospital, a ski shop, housing for 800 employees, and an 8-10 level parking structure for 3,600 cars, adorned with a heliport. The latter is for the planned regular helicopter service between Three Rivers and Mineral King which would cross Sequoia National Park.

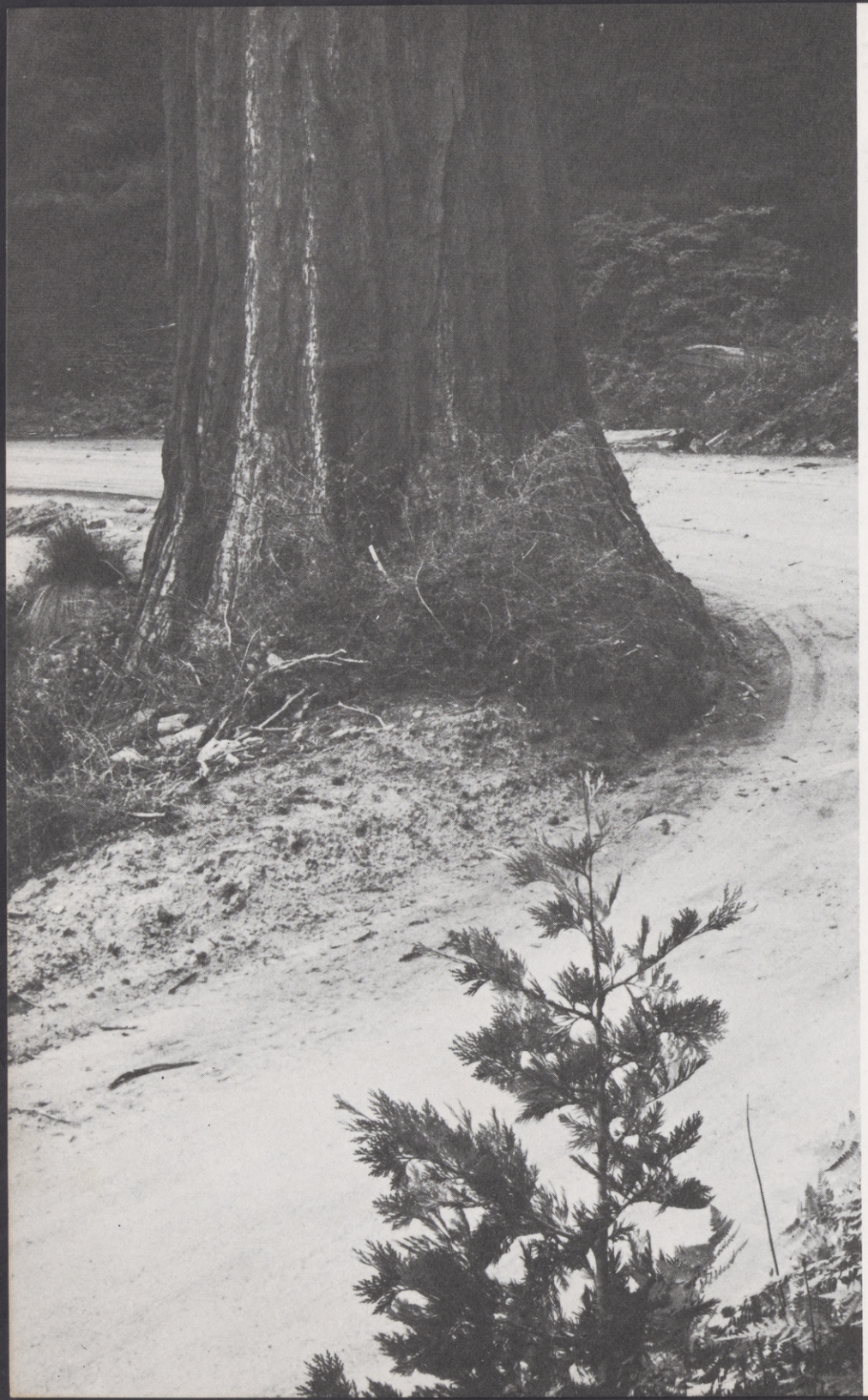
To accommodate 8,500 skiers per day the Disney corporation proposes to erect 22 ski lifts (both chair lifts and gondolas). These lifts would initially penetrate into 5 of the 8 major basins surrounding Mineral King, and, with their steel towers and cables, would mar the landscape like high-tension power lines.

While the current development plan is over-sized, the original Disney plan, which was accepted by the Forest Service, specified a visitation level of 2,500,000! And even with that gigantic base, Walt Disney stated in the Disney bid, "All of us promise that our efforts now and in the future will be dedicated to making Mineral King grow to meet the ever-increasing public need. *I guess you might say that it won't ever be finished.*" (Emphasis added.)

MINERAL KING + AUTOMOBILES + RESTAURANTS + SKI LIFTS

+ PEOPLE + HOTELS + ..... =





Present road to Mineral King in Atwell Grove, Sequoia National Park.

## THE HIGHWAY

Since the present access road will not accommodate enough traffic to insure a profit to the Disney resort, the State of California plans to build a *new* 20-mile-long highway, estimated to cost at least $25 million (although some engineers' estimates run to twice that figure). *This new standard highway would traverse Sequoia National Park for about 9 miles* and would terminate at the auto reception center in the Sequoia National Game Refuge. California Highway officials desire to construct what they describe as an "expressway" consisting of two lanes with frequent passing lanes a half mile in length. It is designed for a capacity of 1,200 vehicles per hour and speeds of 40-50 miles per hour. Construction of the highway would require the removal of some 8 million cubic yards of soil, with attendant scarring and erosion of the steep hillsides to be traversed by the route.

A consultant for the Natonal Park Service advises against a road with a capacity of more than 850 vehicles per hour and speeds of more than 30-40 miles per hour, and advises against passing lanes also. He also calls for as many as three bridges per mile so that two-thirds less scarring will occur. With as many as 2,500 cars destined to enter and leave the resort each weekend by the fifth year following construction, *it is hard to see how the road's size can ultimately be held to the modest dimensions this consultant specifies for protection of Sequoia National Park.*

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miles

## LEGEND

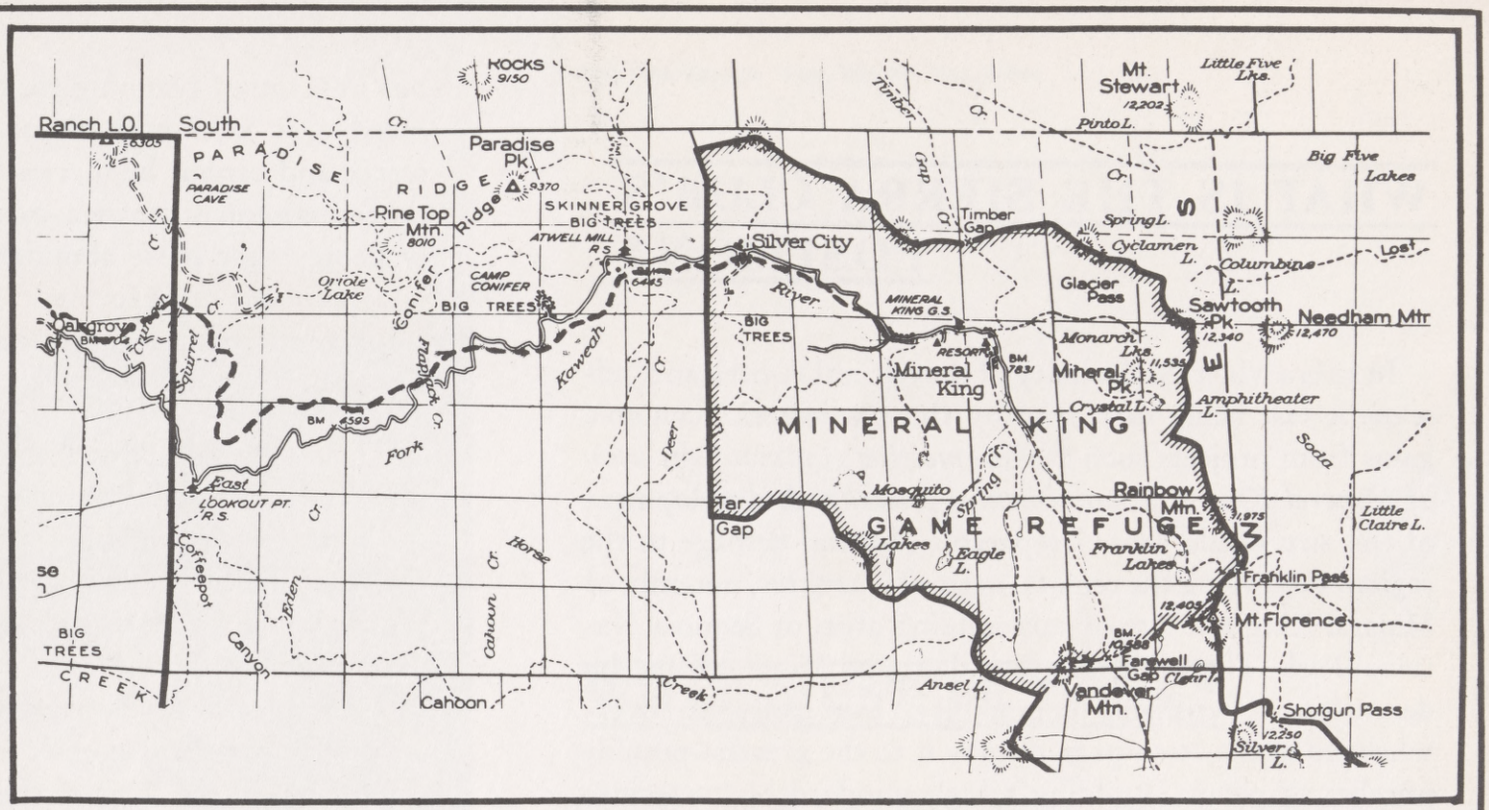
Sequoia National Park

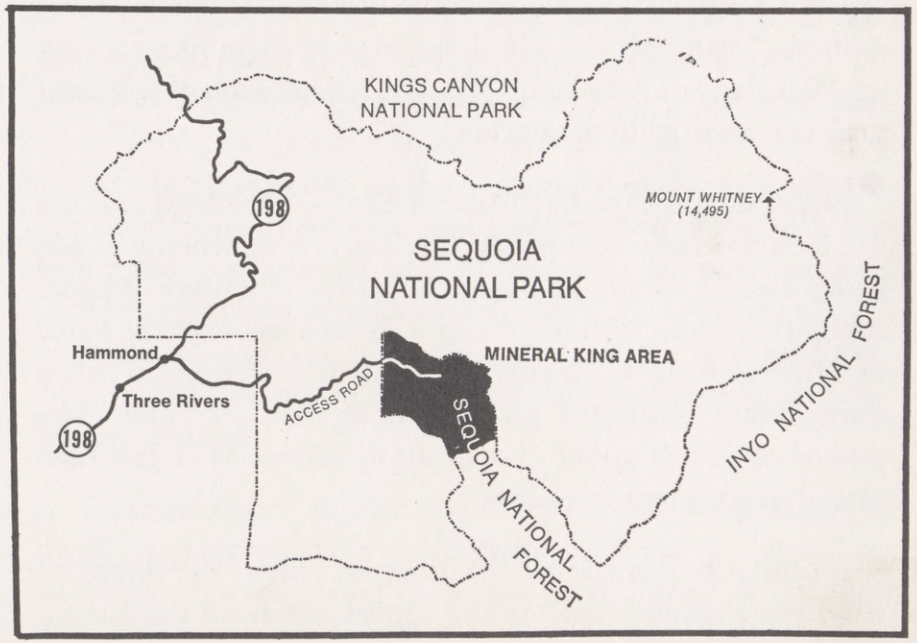
Mineral King

Roads:

proposed

existing





## WHAT IS THE SIERRA CLUB'S POSITION?

In an era when the diversity of the natural American landscape is fast being destroyed by those who seek economic gains from projects such as this, *massive commercialization of Mineral King is a monumental mistake.* A development of this size would cause irreparable physical damage to the region, destroying the remote, natural character, not only of Mineral King but also of surrounding areas of Sequoia National Park. The wilderness in and around Mineral King, by definition a perishable commodity, can easily be overwhelmed in the attempt to display it to the greatest possible number of people. Building a high standard highway into Mineral King in order to "make wilderness accessible to the millions," can only be self-defeating—a little like carving up Michelangelo's statue of "David" so that each of us might own one small chip of marble.

Natural landscape like Mineral King — the land and the life it supports — is important in itself, even when it is not being used or admired by large numbers of visitors. Apparently, those who wish to develop this area feel that the value of Mineral King is "wasted" during winter months when snows often block the present access road. It is no more wasted than any other conservation reserve that has been spared from commercialism.

It cannot be denied that the proposed Disney development would provide additional skiing opportunities for California, but in terms of planning for the future, it should be recognized that wild natural areas are becoming increasingly scarce and cannot be increased in number or in size, while ski centers and other man-made developments are constantly being made more abundant. California has other areas which are adequate for new ski developments such as Yuba Gap, Dunderberg, and Sherwin Bowl, although on a less massive scale.

The destructive effects of the Mineral King development upon the natural environment are grossly underestimated by the Forest Service and by Walt Disney Productions. Consider the potential for excessive erosion resulting from the clearing of timber for ski runs, from "slope preparation" by bulldozer, and from the construction of service roads to facilitate the placing and maintenance of the 22 ski lifts. As anyone knows who has observed other ski areas in mountainous regions of the West in the summertime, revegetation of slopes is extremely slow in an alpine environment.

Also, Mineral King has been designated by Congress as the Sequoia National Game Refuge. To our knowledge, *no studies have been made of the effect of construction activities on Mineral King's habitat for wildlife, and the impact of almost a million visitors each year on a valley two miles long and less than half a mile wide. This is the place to learn from the lesson of overdevelopment in Yosemite Valley.*

Furthermore, despite precautions presumably to be undertaken, the quality of water to be utilized from local sources by a project of this magnitude, and the quality of the treated effluent that eventually reaches the East Fork before it enters Sequoia National Park, present serious questions demanding more than cursory study.

East Fork Kaweah River, Mineral King Valley.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE?

The foregoing considerations emphasize *the urgent need to include Mineral King in Sequoia National Park now that mining is defunct. The Sierra Club endorses National Park status as the best long-range solution to the problem of adequate protection for the fragile natural values of the refuge.* Under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, the future development of the upper reaches of the East Fork can be limited to a moderate level of improved camping facilities and other services commensurate with a "jumping off point" for the back country. Without this status for Mineral King, the pressure will always be present for ever-intensified commercialization.

To show that this potential danger is not being exaggerated, a condominium type development is being planned on 80 acres (for the initial stage) of private land at the road entrance to the game refuge. This private development is

designed for an initial capacity of 1,000 visitors per day, equal to a third of the Disney capacity after five years. Furthermore, this proposed Well-Seaborn development has substantial additional acreage on which to expand. This project, which can only serve to intensify the visitor impact on Mineral King, is immediately adjacent to Sequoia National Park and would impinge upon an outstanding grove of Giant Sequoias that extends across the park boundary in this area.

Neither the Disney nor the Wells-Seaborn project would be possible without the construction of the $25 million highway through the semiwilderness of Sequoia National Park to the west. The Sierra Club feels that the taxpayers' money must not be spent to construct a new highway through a national park to accommodate private developers. A minimum of $22 million in *State* highway funds would be required for the construction—money that could better be spent for urgent highway needs elsewhere in southern California. Further public funds would be expended to plow the road during the ski season.

*This road has been authorized for construction without benefit of a congressional hearing on the impact such an expressway would have upon the natural environment of Sequoia National Park.* For example, in a study prepared for the California Division of Highways by an ecologist having long-term familiarity with sequoia forests, these statements appear:

> "... there are a total of at least 103 giant sequoias below the proposed highway. Of these, 45 are in a position of possible jeopardy because of road construction."
> "This exquisite canyon (Redwood Creek) will undoubtedly require the greatest care of all to cross with a road.... In several places, the slope exceeds 100%.... In spite of plans to bridge this deep canyon because of the depth, accelerated erosion is very likely to be a major problem no matter what engineering activities occur there. ... Of the 32 groves of giant sequoias familiar to the author, this drainageway provides one of the most unique communties of plants he has seen in association with sequoias. This in itself makes the utmost protection desirable."

Besides the scarring caused by the construction itself, with attendant erosion dangers on the steep hillsides, the heavy volume of traffic on summer weekends would shatter the quiet atmosphere of the East Fork canyon and its presently untrammeled sequoia forests on both sides of the river. The forested slopes to the south of the river as it flows through the national parks are in true wilderness condition now, and are proposed by the Park Service for inclusion within the area to be formally designated the Hockett Wilderness, but the "sights and sounds of civilization" from the traffic across the canyon would become all too evident should the expressway be built.

*This compromise of national park values was forced upon the National Park Service before the public and its congressional representatives had adequate opportunity to express its views on the principle involved.* Nor has the public had the opportunity to express its opinion as to whether a part of its heritage of national forest lands should be turned over to a multimillion dollar resort development. Investments of this magnitude might better be made in areas nearer to the large segments of the California population who are economically disadvantaged and who are truly in need of outdoor recreational opportunities close to home.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- If you think that the great beauty and tranquility of Mineral King is a valuable resource which should be preserved;
- If you think that it is wrong to sacrifice one of our rapidly vanishing, scenically superior natural areas to a gargantuan, high-density resort which boasts it will have one million annual visitors, 1,030 rooms, (the 11-story Disneyland Hotel has 608 rooms), many restaurants, helicopter service, 22 ski lifts, and an unending array of other facilities;
- If you feel that it is time to insist that new mass recreation/entertainment centers be placed in areas which are already used for such purposes, rather than in the few remaining areas that have managed to remain relatively untouched (the zoning idea);
- If you feel that the public should have a voice in determining the use of large or especially valuable portions of the public domain; if you object to the fact that since 1953 the U. S. Forest Service has held no public hearings concerning the development of Mineral King; if you feel that the detailed plans for the development of public lands should not be kept a secret;
- If you feel that the Forest Service made a gross error in requesting and selecting a bid for the development of Mineral King three years before completing a study of the impact that such a development would have on Mineral King;
- If you object to your State gas tax money being used to build an unnecessary highway through Sequoia National Park for the sole purpose of serving an unwise resort development while, at the same time, the State claims it must increase the gas tax in order to pay for necessary repairs due to flood damage;

## THEN WRITE!

| | Suggested points to stress: |
|---|---|
| Secretary Clifford Hardin<br>Department of Agriculture<br>Washington, D. C. | Outline the major objections to the proposed development. Describe the gross inadequacies in the Forest Service's handling of this matter. Request permanent changes in the Forest Service procedures. |
| Mr. Roy Disney<br>Walt Disney Productions<br>500 S. Buena Vista<br>Burbank, California 91503 | Object to their plan to overcrowd and over-commercialize a beautiful natural area. Stress that such high-density developments belong elsewhere. |
| Your Senator and Congressman<br>Senate or House Office Building<br>Washington, D. C. 20515 | Ask him to support Congressman Phillip Burton's bill to include Mineral King in Sequoia National Park. *(H.R. 8753)* |
| Your State Senator and Assemblyman<br>State Capitol<br>Sacramento, California | Object to misuse of our gas tax funds. |
| Letters to the Editor of your local newspapers | Any of the above. |

The Sierra Club (1050 Mills Tower, San Francisco, California 94104) will also welcome contributions to support its efforts to preserve Mineral King. Contributions to the Sierra Club Foundation (15th Floor, Mills Tower, San Francisco, California 94104) to support its forthcoming lawsuit to block the Disney development are tax deductible.

Mineral King Basin and Great Western Divide from White Chief Peak. Proposed gondolas would ascend foreground slopes to Mineral Queen Peak (left).

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# SIERRA CLUB

1050 Mills Tower, San Francisco 94104

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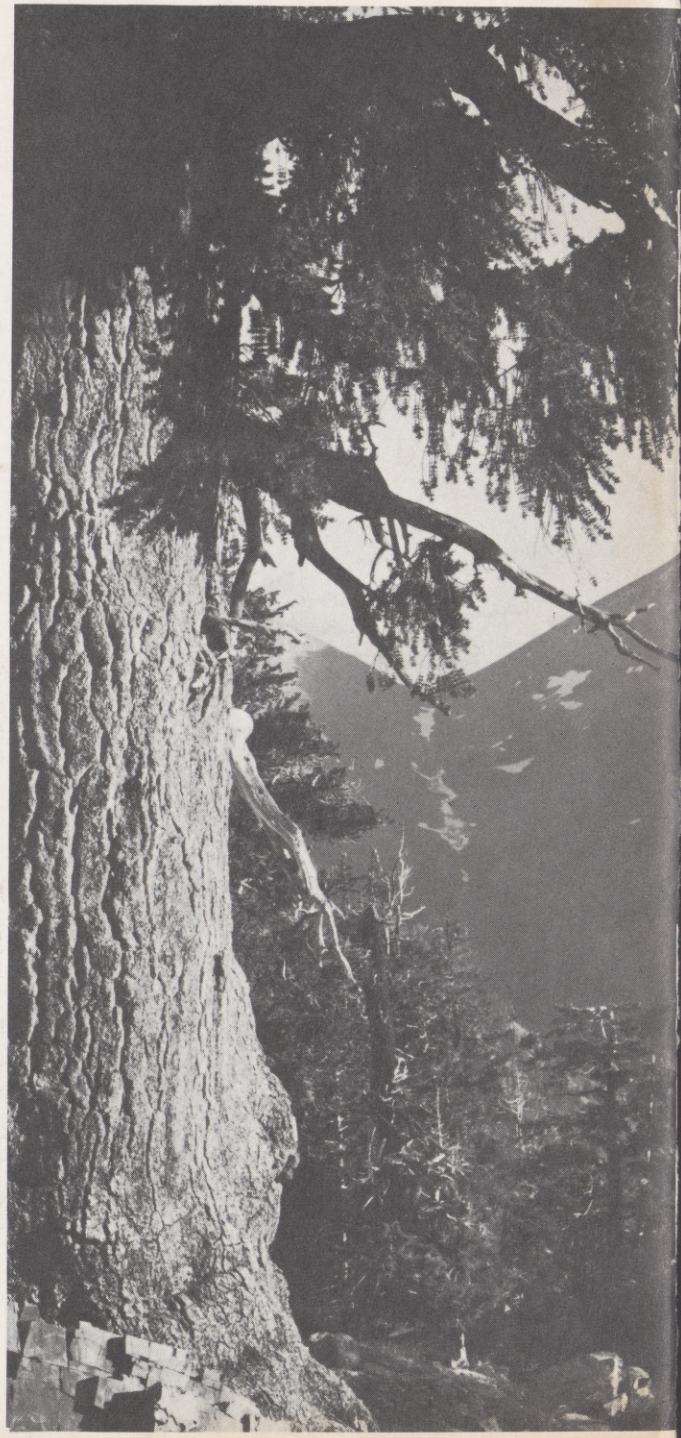

World record Foxtail Pine, Patriarch Grove, Timber Gap. View into Mineral King Valley, with Vandever Mountain and Mineral Queen Basin (background).